

Taking Care--Documenting the Occupational Culture of Home Care Workers
Archie Green Fellows Project, 2014-2015
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Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**Michael Tolman interview, 2015-02-23 : interview conducted by Nathan J.
Moore and Donald Eugene Stacy**

INTERVIEW LOG

00:00:00 Introductions. Currently a student at the University of Oregon, studying digital arts.

00:01:36 Name is Mike Tolman. Lives in Eugene, Oregon. Born 1977, in Ontario, Oregon. Moved to Pendleton, Oregon, for junior high-school and high-school. Lived in Madison, Wisconsin, for one year.

00:02:48 Has been a direct support worker for over 19 years. Started in late 1995. Currently works with a single male autistic client. Client receives services through Oregon Supported Living Program (OSLP), but lives alone in a house.

00:03:29 What led you to become a direct support worker? Had been working “regular Joe” jobs (theater, restaurant work). Graduated from high-school and moved in next to classmate who was a care provider. It paid more than previous jobs. Applied for a direct care position in Pendleton. Was earning \$4.85 per hour. Quality of work was appealing; ended up staying in profession.

00:04:42 How is your current job different than previous work? You get a sense that you are doing good for the world. Internal gratification and gratification from community. “It's good for your soul.”

00:05:59 Question from Don Stacy: Have you worked in other states? Worked in a state hospital in Madison, Wisconsin. A vastly different set-up. Describes state hospital model.

00:07:54 The work in Wisconsin was very different than in Oregon. Clients did not have rights or a say in their care. Shares example of client being forced to go to the bathroom. The company that Mike works for now is very progressive. Quit job in Madison and did not return to being a care provider until moving back to Oregon.

00:10:15 Special skills/qualities needed? Anyone can learn the skills, but it takes the right kind of personality. Must have empathy, patience, willingness to learn, ability to shelve preconceived

notions. Must shed that part of you that casts clients as the “other.” Workers in the “medical side of things” do have to learn more skills (operating medical equipment, wheelchairs, etc.). Mike works in behavioral side of industry.

00:13:34 Discusses trainings for learning how to deal with client behaviors. Emphasis is on preventing behaviors before they happen.

00:15:48 Shares stories about working with a client for seven years who had intense medical needs. Also, talks about working with clients who communicate through non-verbal methods.

00:20:16 Relationships with clients: Mike has worked with certain clients for many years; “you can't help but get close.” It is a fine line that workers always discuss.

00:21:30 Important to constantly communicate with co-workers about your relationships with clients. Talking about it helps you to not get too close. Shares example of co-worker who got too close and had to stop working with client, but took on new role in client's life. The company does recognize that long-term staff members will have some personal connections with clients. It is allowed as long as the lines do not blur too much.

00:24:29 Typical day with autistic clients – tries to make each day similar to the last. Works in afternoon until morning. Checks paperwork, money, and med logs every day. Describes client's typical day and how he helps him deal with organization and unexpected schedule changes.

00:29:55 Discusses “structured teaching” – educational activities that help autistic clients handle transitions. Describes how “structured teaching” is applied with current client using visual images.

00:35:17 How do you approach “intimate tasks?” It all starts with the comfort level of clients. Some are more modest than others. Important to understand clients and give them as much space as you can to accommodate comfort levels. Must balance comfort levels with healthcare needs.

00:41:43 What is house culture? The sum total of personalities of everyone who works and lives in a particular house. Can be a positive or negative thing. Examples of poor house culture – workers trying new strategies outside of clients' support plans that are not positive in the long term.

00:48:17 Positive house culture involves support and ingenuity. Allows for trying new work strategies but includes discussion among workers. Support for clients is more like “cheer-leading.”

00:51:54 Discusses staff interactions in various house situations. Worked previously in a house with co-workers who all had similar interests and were friends outside of work. An easygoing, thoughtful, and positive house culture. Negative side – the “rumor mill.” Currently works in a house with only one staff person at a time. Interacts with co-workers only at staff meetings.

00:56:09 Comments by videographer Don Stacy about "house culture" in the house in which he worked with Mike Tolman.

00:57:08 Many people who come to work at OSLP have heard about the work from a family member or friend. Very few people respond to classified ads. People who know someone in the field are more likely to think that they can do the work.

00:58:30 Union participation? Has not been involved in union activism. Has been a rank and file union member and a manager. Made sure to not “overstep bounds” when working as a manager. Learned more about the union as a manager. You cannot do anything that will come back to harm you.

Only three union reps in a company of 200 direct support workers. Union communication has been sparse recently.

01:00:55 Has the union's presence been positive for the industry? Yes, overall. Full medical and dental up until three years ago. Also has union perks such as personal days, holiday pay, earned time off.

01:03:01 Has not spoken about the importance of direct support work in a public forum. Regrets not being able to, but it is difficult with school responsibilities. Currently participating in a letter-writing campaign. Main union steward is a “really good guy” and represents workers at public forums. However, it took so long to get positive changes in the industry that many workers have given up. Discusses positive and negative aspects of union representation. Does not think that union rallies make changes; emphasizes “face time” with legislators instead.

01:09:54 What do you do to relax? Plays music in bands. Currently in a long-term relationship. Also has pets. Learned how to deal with stress as a manager. Maintains the philosophy that “nothing is permanent.”

01:13:45 Would become a manager again, but would not become boss of friends.

01:15:38 Looking for a career change after graduation. Has been a manager and does not want to go into administration. Has enjoyed working as a direct support worker. Will always advocate for more compensation for direct support workers.

01:19:12 Has made promotional videos for his company and helped clients make a music video.

01:20:40 Participated in an annual benefit called “The Arts of OSLP,” which included a silent auction and live music.

01:21:30 Discusses OSLP's art center that displays clients' artwork. Was going to apply for assistant director position, but decided to finish school. Important to expose clients to arts & culture.

01:25:35 Helped a client record his own songs and put music to client's lyrics.

01:27:42 Last thoughts: there are a lot of people doing some kind of caregiving work for a living. Different job titles denote different responsibilities. Personal support workers do not have to take as many trainings as direct support professionals. Thinks the field stays underfunded because people do not realize how much training and work is involved.

01:34:14 Does not think that the typical person walking down the street knows exactly what DSPs do. Often receives “passing accolades” – example: “You are doing God's work!” Notes that workers in the industry are becoming more public about the work.

01:38:02 How do you feel about the future of the profession? It will always be around. Not too worried about the future because the kids of today are more progressive than kids in the past. Discusses his first interactions with a person with developmental disabilities.

01:45:17 End of interview.